



Clear Creek County Open Space Annual Report 2022-2024

INTRODUCTION

The Clear Creek County Open Space Commission (OSC) is tasked with presenting an Annual Report of its activities during the previous year. Major organizational changes affecting the OSC were undertaken over the past few years and with all the changes, preparing the Annual Report did not happen. Hence, this Report will examine what the OSC has accomplished from 2022 through 2024. This Report will explain the organizational changes, highlight the acquisitions made, and describe management and construction projects that have occurred.

The mission of the Clear Creek County Open Space Commission is *to preserve and maintain the County's unique character and natural environment by protecting our streams, woodlands, meadows, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, prominent vistas, geologic features, and cultural resources to enhance the quality of life for residents and the enjoyment of the outdoors for both residents and visitors.* One way to summarize what the OSC does is the tag line which is now be found on our signs: PRESERVE, PROTECT, ENJOY.

The Clear Creek County Open Space Program is funded by the Open Space Trust Fund. It was established in 1999 by a vote of the Clear Creek County voters; it authorizes a one mil tax to be collected and placed in the Open Space Trust Fund. Initially, distribution of the funds was allocated 75% land acquisition and 25% management. In 2010, the voters changed the allocation to 60% land acquisition and 40% management. Management includes any activity not associated with the purchase of land. Planning efforts, facility construction, and maintenance are paid for from the Management category. In addition to the Open Space Trust Fund, the Open Space Program has successfully received grants from organizations such as Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife (CPW), History Colorado, Denver Regional Council of Government, Jefferson County Open Space, and Gates Family Foundation.

Since its inception, the Open Space Trust Fund has been used to buy or has received by donation about 2,582 acres. In addition, the BOCC has designated 2,785 acres of former Bureau of Land Management lands, often called "County Lands" or Recreation and Public Purposes Lands (RP&P) as Open Space. The OSC currently oversees 5,367 acres. (Maps showing the various properties locations are available on the County's web site. The link <https://www.clearcreekcounty.us/192/Open-Space> will take you directly to the web page.)



Until 2022, management was overseen by the OSC. With the passage of the new Charter, the OSC now serves in an advisory role to the BOCC and management is done by County staff in the Recreation/Open Space Department.

ADOPTION OF NEW CHARTER FOR CLEAR CREEK COUNTY OPEN SPACE COMMISSION

In 2022, the BOCC directed staff to work with the Open Space Commission to shift land management authority to County staff and have the OSC focus on its advisory responsibilities. Resolution 22-77 was adopted by the BOCC which established this change, including an updated Open Space Commission Charter and Bylaws, and rescinded the 2001 BOCC action that had given land management responsibility to the OSC.

Prior to the adoption of Resolution 22-77, the Open Space Commission, as a volunteer Board, provided significant service to the County over its first two decades. The OSC functioned like a County department, the OSC hired and managed a staff person and the Chair had budgetary authority. The OSC, despite meeting only monthly, was successful, completing several significant acquisitions and development projects and accruing a significant fund balance.

As the County had increasing amounts of land designated as Open Space and there was increasing pressure on recreation management as a County wide strategic concern, it became clear that the County needed to devote more staff resources to recreation. Cross jurisdictional interrelations became more important as the recreation economy became a growing force in the community and the County's future. The BOCC decided that having a "recreation department" was a priority for the County and it made sense for County staff to take over the management responsibilities. Recognizing the importance of the work that had been done by the OSC and its mission and the need to have input from the community on the management of Open Space lands and future acquisitions, a strategic advisory role was defined for the OSC to provide its expertise and oversight of the Open Space Program.

The transition from an OSC directly engaged in land management to one providing an advisory role to the BOCC has not been without bumps in the road. The membership of the OSC has largely turned over, with only a few members staying through the transition. However today, staff and the OSC are working well together, consistent processes for the development of land management plans and acquisition are in place or emerging, and roles are clear and levels of trust are high. As a part of developing the trust between staff, OSC members and the BOCC, site visits to Open Space properties have been taken and joint BOCC/OSC meetings have been held. These visits and meetings have provided opportunities for direct communication, discussion of



issues, and increased awareness of the values of the Open Space lands, the dilemmas faced in management, and the concerns of all.

With the establishment of the Recreation Department, how Open Space funding was allocated was changed. Previously, the Open Space Coordinator was funded 100% by the Open Space Fund. It was changed to 50% with the other 50% coming from the General Fund for work on the Commercial Outfitters Program (Rafting) and Special Events Program. Out of the remaining funds approximately 50% was dedicated to the Trails Program to cover work on Open Space properties. In subsequent years, the amount from the Open Space Fund for the Trails Program is based on the amount of time working on Open Space designated properties spent the previous fiscal year.

NEW PROCESSES FOR MANAGEMENT AND ACQUISITION

In an effort to establish standardized processes for Open Space management and land acquisitions, staff have worked with the OSC to define processes and to prepare forms to be used so that key information is presented clearly. These forms were presented to the BOCC and adopted. They are currently in use.

As presented in the OSC Process Manual 2024, the Land Use Recommendation and Sustainability Analysis (LUR) is done as part of process to determine if a property(s) should be purchased or a donation accepted. The key task of this document is to evaluate how the proposed purchase/donation meets the mission of the Open Space Program using the Suitability Criteria that have been used since 2001. It also presents a vision and goals for the proposed property(s) and identifies the types of uses that may occur. The BOCC is provided this document when asked to approve a possible purchase/donation. After the purchase, this document provides direction to staff as to how to manage the property(s). It is used as the starting point for development of a Land Management Plan (LMP) for a property(s). Not all properties will have Land Management Plans as they are time intensive to prepare. Staff and the OSC are concentrating on developing Land Management Plans for the most used properties. For those properties without Land Management Plans, the Land Use Recommendation and Suitability Analysis provides on-going guidance. The LUR process has been used several times since its adoption. For example, it was used when the BOCC was asked to accept the donation of the Jennie Mining Claim, to provide funding to Silver Plume's purchase of the Jack Pine Mining Claims, on the Stevens Gulch Mining Claims purchase, and as a supporting document for the Alvarado Open Space Land Management Plan.

The County has many Open Space designated properties that were purchased or designated as Open Space (mostly former BLM lands) prior to the adoption of the OSC Process Manual 2024. These properties do not have adopted LUR Analyses. Recognizing the need to have the



guidance provided by the LUR Analysis, early in 2025, the OSC decided to develop LUR Analyses for these properties which will be presented to the BOCC in groups for approval with the goal of having all of the current properties covered by approved LUR Analyses.

MANAGEMENT

Properties managed as Open Space can be found throughout the County. They vary in size, terrain, accessibility, and intensity of use. Open Space properties are managed by Recreation/ Open Space staff which includes one half time Open Space Coordinator, a Trail Supervisor and three Trails Technicians. Over the time covered by this Report, the number of staff has ranged from one fulltime Facilities Manager and seasonal Trails Supervisor and three Trails Crew in 2022 to its current configuration of one full time Trails Supervisor and three seasonal Trails Crew.

Management activities include developing management plans, actual construction of trails and other facilities, and day-to-day maintenance (e.g., weed management, erosion control, trash collection, cleaning, and painting of fences, buildings, etc.). The Open Space Program, guided by the OSC in their advisory role, spends time on efforts that relate to the “workings” of the Open Space Program which include submitting grant applications for funds, the management of grants and contracts received, facilitating the land acquisition process, and participation in County and State efforts that relate to open space.

Following is a summary of management activities undertaken in 2022-2024:

- **Peaks to Plains Trail- Clear Creek Greenway Canyon Phase 2 (AKA Clear Creek Trail)**– Phase 2 was completed in 2022. It goes from just downstream of the Oxbow Trailhead Parking Lot upstream towards Tunnel 6. It is a very short segment, approximately ¼ mile, that goes under the US 6 bridge and lies between US 6 and Clear Creek. This section required the use of micro piles to create a trail platform that allowed the Creek water levels to move through the area without affecting the trail. Using these micro piles was very expensive, hence, the very short segment.
- **Hidden Valley Open Space including Saw Mill Gulch** – Sale of right-of- way in this area to CDOT for I70 Floyd Hill Project that is widening and straightening the Interstate between the top of Floyd Hill and Hidden Valley occurred. The funds received were deposited into the Open Space Acquisition Fund as required. As a part of the CDOT project, portions of the Peaks to Plains Trail will be rebuilt. Looking to the future, CDOT is using the area along the north flank of I70 between the current I70 Exit 244 to US6 and the Highway 40 intersection as a platform for construction of the viaducts. Once



project is done, they will leave a “trail bed” which can be paved as a portion of the P2P Trail.

- **Alvarado Open Space Park (aka Shadows Ranch)** – During this time period, the Park was open to the public for use. The CCC Trails Team improved some of the existing trails in the area. They also widened the trail around the pond and created one that follows the North side of Clear Creek. In September 2023, the County sought public input on what the citizens of Clear Creek wanted to see at the Park. As a way to get input, the OSC held an Open House at the Park. About 15 people attended. In addition, a survey was posted on the County’s website. About 70 responses were received. The Survey results clearly reflected a desire to keep the Park relatively undeveloped and predominantly managed for locals. With that direction, the OSC completed drafting the Alvarado Open Space Park Land Management Plan and presented it to the BOCC for adoption.

Based on the Land Management Plan, in 2024, THK Associates was hired to develop a Master Plan for the area. At the direction of the BOCC, the Master Plan only addressed the portion of the area between Alvarado Road and I70. The BOCC wanted to continue to have the option to consider if the south side has potential for development as housing. The Master Plan process included seeking input from the BOCC, the OSC, and various stakeholders in the County. A on-site Open House was held to get reactions to the two Master Plan concepts being considered. Key values to be considered in developing the plan were:

- Safety
- Preserve tranquil nature
- Low impact uses

Based on those values, the Master Plan developed two concepts that pursued three objectives:

- Restoration and Preservation
- Community Pride and Identity
- Controlled Creek Access

The two concepts were very similar. One emphasized focusing on the botanical aspect of the property while the other focused on providing more gathering places. The Plan suggested ways to implement the Plan in phases which would allow efforts to begin rather than waiting to have all the funds needed.



After reviewing them, the OSC recommended adoption of Concept 2 which had the botanical focus. Their recommendation was presented to the BOCC who adopted Concept 2. The estimate cost is \$292,000. Over the next year or so, the Open Space staff and OSC will look for funding opportunities to pursue.

On the management side, the asbestos in the Caretakers Cabin was mitigated which removes any hazards. The future of the building is yet to be decided. The CCC Trails Team has maintained the existing trails annually. Usage has increased at the Park. People are using the Park for dog walking, swimming in the pond, ice skating on the pond in the Winter, fishing, etc.

- **Floyd Hill Open Space Park**— In 2017, the acquisition of the Floyd Hill Open Space property (108 acres) by Clear Creek and Jefferson counties occurred. It provides public access from the I70 corridor over the ridge into Clear Creek Canyon to a contiguous expanse of open space, over 600 acres in Clear Creek County and 12,000 acres in Jefferson County, that protect key wildlife habitat and offers diverse recreational opportunities. At the southern end of the 108 acres parcel, is a trailhead that is easily accessed from I70. From 2018-2023, work was done by the CCC Trails Team to build the multi-use trails system planned for the area.

In 2021, a downhill bicycle only trail called The Sluice was built using a professional trail building company. It is an intermediate/advanced trail. Prior to the opening, so that riders would have some idea of what to expect, the Yeti Race Team was filmed riding the trail. It can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELSI2TpbCE8> The trail sees heavy use and Colorado Mountain Bike Association (COMBA) volunteers maintain it weekly to keep it in good riding condition. Due to its proximity to the Denver Metro Area, the entire trail system sees heavy usage. The parking lot is often full in the late afternoons and on weekends.

- **GOCO Resilient Communities Grant for Floyd Hill Trailhead Improvements-** As the COVID 19 Pandemic continued, in late 2020, Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) offered a grant program to address the increasing impacts recreation and Open Space lands were receiving as people sought outdoors recreation as a way to cope with the Pandemic's restrictions. Clear Creek County received a total grant of \$343,933 of which approximately \$48,000 was dedicated to hiring a youth trails team to improve the trails. The remainder was to improve the parking lot, install permanent restrooms, and improve signage. With the award of the grant, the County hired Muller Engineering to develop construction documents. The process was lengthy and by the time approved plans were finalized, the cost of the project had risen. Clear Creek County reached out to Jefferson County Open Space, co-owners of the Trailhead, to see if they could



contribute funds. They agreed to provide funding through their Trails Partnership Grant Program. The project received two grants for a total of \$325,000. Construction occurred in 2024. Final touches such as placement of boulders along the driveway and ensuring revegetation success will be undertaken in 2025.

- **Weed Management**-A significant element of the Floyd Hill Open Space Trailhead is the large meadow visible from I70. Through the years covered by this Annual Report, the County has had Foothills Vegetation Management spray the meadow for various weeds. As weed seeds are very durable, it is anticipated that weed management will be an on-going issue. In addition, as evidenced by the thistle plants seen near the trailhead parking lot, weed seed often comes in with visitors, either on their shoes or bike tires. Addressing weeds at the Trailhead will be a priority to keep them from spreading further. The current assessment is that with this repeated management action, the weeds are under control.
- **Re-routing Neighborhood Trail Through Charlie's Place** – An alternate trail for those cycling or walking from the Dumont area to Lawson follows the south side of Clear Creek along West Dumont Road, passes through Charlies Place following the driveway and parking lot, and continues along the sewer line right-of-way to Silver Lake Drive. In 2022, increased trail usage was resulting in the Shelter dogs being bothered when they were in their runs or the play area. Shelter staff expressed concern about the stress on the dogs and asked if it was possible to re-route the trail to minimize interactions between trail users and Shelter dogs. The CCC Trails Team, Open Space staff, and Shelter staff walked the area and identified an option that moved the trail onto the adjacent Open Space property closer to the Creek. The CCC Trails Team spent a week relocating the trail which minimized the interactions. To totally eliminate the interactions, a section of the trail still needs to be moved. However, due to the terrain, it would require a significant investment in time and materials. The CCC Trails Team will consider various options to determine if they are feasible.
- **CCC Trails Team Efforts** – The CCC Trails Team is responsible for a portion of the County's non-motorized multiuse trail network, exceeding 200 miles in length traversing canyons to alpine terrain, that is made up of historic trails, National Forest Trails (USFS Clear Creek Ranger District), a Greenway Trail, 35 miles of the Continental Divide Trail, four much visited 14'ers, and new trails including directional mountain biking trails. Accessed easily by the many people who live on the Front Range as well as visitors from elsewhere, in recent years, these trails have seen increased heavy use as people discover the various trails and recreational opportunities in Clear Creek County. The high-altitude environment, 8,000 to 14,000+ feet, with its extreme weather conditions also causes trail degradation on an on-going basis. The historic nature of many trails



(150+ years old) requires significant repairs due to their age and as they were not built to be trails but to be access to mines and other uses. These factors result in the need to routinely maintain the entire Trail System yearly as well as undertake numerous repairs on the aging infrastructure to provide visitors an enjoyable and safe recreational experience and reduce natural resource degradation. Through the time covered by this Annual Report, the CCC Trail Teams efforts included yearly maintenance on many of the trails, rebuilding areas and bridges where needed and the completion of a number of restoration projects where historic retaining walls have collapsed.

- **Management of Open Space Lands** – Open Space staff and the CCC Trails Team spend a significant amount of time on general “management” activities. Activities such as ensuring the trash is collected, toilets are cleaned and pumped, appropriate signage is installed, removing fallen trees, and other similar activities require on-going attention. With the development of more “facilities” such as the Lawson White Water Park and the Peaks to Plains Trail in the Canyon, more time is being devoted to this part of management process. In addition, issues associated with right-of-way, driveway easements, investigating trespass events, illegal tree cutting, etc. are also addressed.
- **OSC Involvement in County Efforts** – Open Space staff and members of the OSC regularly participate in County efforts where Open Space manages lands are involved or nearby and/or our expertise in land management and recreation is relevant. These efforts include:
 - BOCC’s effort to define the County’s recreation goal;
 - CDOT Floyd Hill Technical Team which is considering the redesign of I70 from Floyd Hill to Hidden Valley;
 - Clear Creek County Shooting Range Project which is looking at the development of a shooting and archery range in Dumont.
 - County Rafting Program as a number of the put ins or take out points are on Open Space land; and,
 - Providing input on proposed regulations being developed by the Planning Department (e.g. camping regulations)

ACQUISITIONS

During this time period, the OSC worked on acquiring some unique land parcels that advance Open Space goals as well as assisting the Town of Silver Plume in purchasing some key mining claims.



- **Jack Pine Mining Claims Purchase by Town of Silver Plume** – In 2022, the County assisted the Town of Silver Plume to purchase 200 acres along the bottom of Republican Mountain and including Brown Gulch, a highly visible mountainside contiguous to the Town. The 200 acres is made up of 96 overlapping mining claims which are the scenic viewshed seen by millions who drive by on I70. The Town and owners arrived at a mutually agreed upon price of \$495,000. Silver Plume sought this purchase to keep this land in public ownership.

The mining claims were owned by the Watrous Family, longtime residents of Clear Creek County, and were part of Fabian Watrous' estate. The following reasons were identified as the reasons that Clear Creek County should financially assist the Town with this purchase:

- Mining claims are within the National Historic Landmark District;
- Protects a critical backdrop seen from I70;
- The claims all have MR 1 development rights, residential development would eliminate multi use and the mining history;
- Development would have a severe negative impact on the Town of Silver Plume;
- 730 Trail goes through the Claims; and,
- Includes historical artifacts of Clear Creek's mining history.

The OSC supported the idea of using Open Space Funds to support the Town's purchase. They made that recommendation to the BOCC who agreed. The Town successfully raised funds from a variety of sources including foundations and individuals. The purchase was completed at the end of 2022.

- **Stevens Gulch Mining Claims**—In early 2024, the Watrous Family approached the OSC again regarding the Stevens Mining Group properties, a group of mining claims and millsites they own in the Stevens Gulch that crosses into the Waldorf Basin area, that they would like to see protected from development. The specifics of the proposed purchase include 45 mining claims and five millsites for a total of 174.668 acres that lie on the steep slope from the valley floor up to and along the ridge in Stevens Gulch and cross the ridge into the Waldorf Basin. Three millsite areas are on the valley floor in Stevens Gulch. The other two millsites, Theodore Cook and J.R. Murdock, are along the Stevens Gulch access road and are the two most developable sites. The claims and millsites are adjacent to National Forest. Hikers heading towards two well visited 14ers, Grays and Torreys, travel an access trail that runs along the bottom of the valley westward. The claims are southeast of the Trail and provide its backdrop.



The Watrous Family wanted these parcels to be protected for their open space values on into the future. They wanted to place a deed restriction that would identify allowed uses. The County Attorney worked with the seller to determine language that is acceptable to both sides. The following language for the deed restriction is:

“This deed is granted with the provision that the land is used by Buyer subject to the following:

- 1) To the extent County is able, it will protect and manage the natural environmental and ecological communities that inhabit them;
- 2) The Property will be open only to non-motorized recreation except for motorized use only on roads designated for motorized use; and,
- 3) Cultural resources will be managed for any governmental level of action in a process applied in accord with the National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 as applied in Colorado.”

The OSC felt the mining claims and millsites were a good fit with the Open Space criteria for acquisition and supported the deed restriction. They also conducted a site visit to see them. The various land acquisition process documents were prepared by staff and supported recommending purchasing the claims and millsites.

The seller’s proposed price was \$262,002, which is \$1,500 per acre. The OSC considered the proposed price from the perspective of their responsibilities as advisors to the BOCC regarding the OS Fund and from their experience regarding similar lands and recommended the County offer a price of \$218,335 which is \$1,250 per acre. That price was accepted by the seller. In July 2024, the OSC unanimously approved a motion to recommend the BOCC direct staff to initiate negotiations regarding the purchase of Stevens Gulch/Waldorf Basin Mining Claims and Millsites. The BOCC adopted the recommendation and County staff worked with the sellers and undertook the due diligence tasks needed. The sale was completed in December 2024.

- **Donations of Mining Claims** – Over the years, the County has been approached by landowners about possible donations of land to the County to be managed as Open Space. These parcels are evaluated as to their location and open space values before the OSC recommends to the BOCC that the County accept the donations. No donations were received in this time period.



PLANS FOR 2025

As we look ahead to 2025 in terms of projects and workload, the following projects were identified:

- Asbestos Removal at Caretakers Cabin at Alvarado Open Space Park
- Floyd Hill Open Space Trailhead Finishing Touches
- Branding Plan for Open Space Signage
- Build a boardwalk at Geneva Basin Iron Fen
- Draft the Sheep Keep Land Management Plan

Other on-going activities will continue. In addition, ways to invite the public to explore Clear Creek County's Open Space will be identified and pursued. As always, staff and the OSC will respond to Open Space opportunities as they arise.

POSTSCRIPT

Having been around for over 20 years, those who helped create and establish the Clear Creek County Open Space Commission are getting on in years. Most have left the OSC and are involved in other activities. Their legacy continues as the current OSC members build upon the earlier efforts. Current members are grateful to the 25 or so folks who have served on the OSC over the years and helped to establish an organization that is fulfilling its mission.

Frank Young, one of the founding members, continued to serve on the OSC until his death in October 2023. He will be remembered for his love of Clear Creek County, his role in the BLM land transfer, his tireless efforts to protect the County's open spaces, and his willingness to devote endless hours on Open Space properties. A bench will be placed at Alvarado Open Space in his memory.